

SERVICE FOR THE BLIND.

Muriel Mercer & Kenneth R. Shaffer.

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**M.C. MIGEL LIBRARY  
AMERICAN PRINTING  
HOUSE FOR THE BLIND**

15 WEST 16th STREET  
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10011



At another branch, the committee has set itself to the task of stimulating interest in a new branch building very much needed in that section of the city.

A few months ago, a city-wide Hobby Show was sponsored by the Public Library with neighborhood shows at the branches followed by a "Pick of the Crop" exhibit at the Central Library. No small part of the success of the enterprise was due to the support of the Branch Neighborhood Advisory Committees.

As one development of the Friends of the Library idea, this Branch Neighborhood Advisory Committee plan gives most encouraging promise of success. Not only is it equipping each branch with a small, workable committee drawn from the immediate area of the branch and naturally interested in the welfare of the

library which they, their families, and their neighbors use, but these will develop later a past-membership influence which should eventually have a salutary effect in each community. As interpreters of the community to the branch library, each committee should be a vital force. As interpreters of the branch library to the community, each active committee and those who will have served on it in earlier years, should form a slowly but steadily growing group of Friends of the Library, real friends because they understand.

Moreover, as a by-product, it is not hazardous to predict that these committees may incidentally become a most satisfactory training school for future trustees of the entire Public Library system.

## Service For The Blind

MURIEL MERCER<sup>1</sup> AND KENNETH R. SHAFFER

Indiana State Library, Indianapolis

THE PUBLIC LIBRARY, as it is enjoyed by "sighted" persons today, has a tradition of about one hundred years. By 1853, the objectives of library service had been discovered and were uttered in Philadelphia before an organization of the library profession in this country.

The library for the blind has a different and shorter history. A few years earlier, people were regarding dubiously Samuel Gridley Howe's statement that blindness was not a "blessed visitation of God," but that it was a handicap or affliction which should be cared for through proper and special education. There were, at that time, many kinds of embossed types; books, however, were few, and save in one or two instances, were inaccessible to the public. Public library service for the blind is only at present coming into existence as such—its beginning, at the earliest, has been within the last three decades.

Yet with all the confusion arising from the absence of standardized types, the multitudes of independent agencies whose cooperation is vital, and the lack of any formalized technique, the evolution and operation of the library for the blind with its miraculous and new innovations is as brilliant as any chapter in library history. It is yet an open field wherein imagination and pioneer efficiency play a more important part than craftsmanship.

The Library of Congress has, at present, established twenty-eight depository libraries for the blind in the United States. The Indiana State Library is the most recent addition to this group—the twenty-eighth—and as such depends upon this source for most of the new books printed in Braille that it receives.

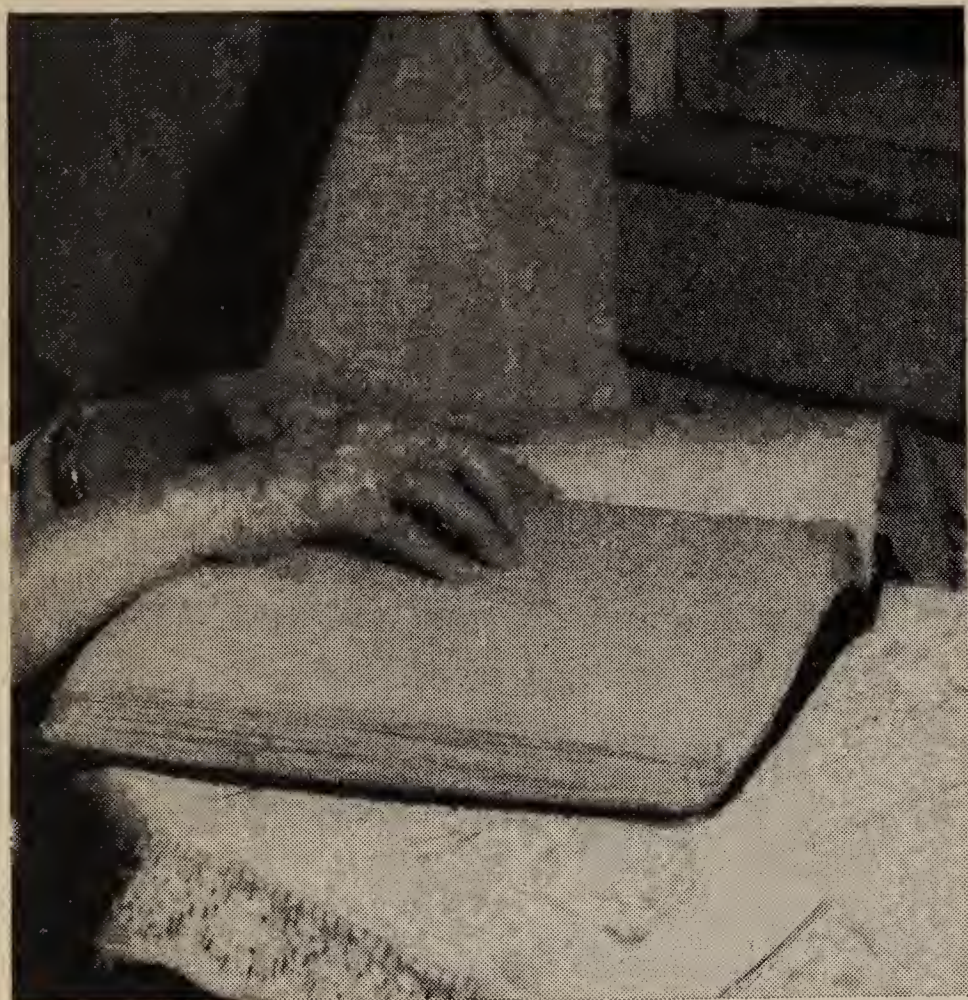
It may be added parenthetically at this point that Braille is now the standard embossed type in use for the blind. It consists of an alphabet made up of six raised dots combined in various positions, and is printed in three "grades." The first of these grades is a complete word for word transcription; the second includes a moderate number of contractions, and the third permits a sufficient number of contractions and omissions to allow it to be read with considerable speed. While Braille is being taught almost exclusively, many older persons still use only the displaced types—Moon and New York Point—to an extent that special provisions must be made for them in the printed catalogs of the collection.

The selection of titles to be published for the blind by the Library of Congress is comparable to the policy set by the Modern Library or Everyman's. It includes the classics and standard works of non-fiction—biographies, histories, and accounts of travel—as well as a small number of the best of the current literary output. *Gone with the Wind* in Braille was received before the regular edition was placed on the library shelves. Almost invariably the books published by the Library of Congress have a permanent value; they are durably bound and serve well as the basis of any collection.

Until very recently, however, one of the most considerable problems was in supplying interesting reading material to a large group of persons whose tastes were not as educated or as catholic as the Library of Congress standards demand. Except by outright purchase, a few hand-transcribed books received through the Junior League, in cooperation with the American Red Cross, furnished the only material available to patrons whose tastes were chiefly concerned with reading for

<sup>1</sup> Miss Mercer is librarian of Service For The Blind at The Indiana State Library.





READING BRAILLE AT HOME

entertainment. Braille books are expensive and the more popular titles have only a temporary value, yet there was an urgent need for books selected by the librarian who had the actual requests of readers at hand.

In the Indiana district, this problem was successfully solved when the transcription of this particular kind of books was undertaken with the aid of the WPA.

The Braille Transcribing Project of the WPA is unique in that it is the only project which employs the blind. With the exception of sighted readers, all of the project staff from the operators of Braille Writers to proofreaders and supervisors are blind men and women. At the Indiana State Library, the supervision of the entire group is carried on by a man who has had many years of experience in the Braille transcribing service of the American Red Cross. The pages, after having been carefully proofread, are shellacked and passed on to another WPA project for binding.

By this means, the collection of Library of Congress material has been widely supplemented with adventure, detective, and mystery stories, as well as important titles which are not otherwise available. It has proved an invaluable instrument in reaching the variety of reading interests represented in a heterogeneous group of patrons.

The directness in which this project has been used to reach actual needs for special embossed material can be clearly illustrated by several requests which have been discharged in recent months. One correspondent, a housewife, received a booklet of recipes for frozen desserts and instructions for using an electric refrigerator; another person was supplied with a transcription of the Constitutions of the state of Indiana and the United States; still another was furnished with a popular volume of poetry written by a local person. Radio is the favorite pastime of many blind persons, and trans-

criptions of the Morse code have been very popular with short wave fans. Correspondence in Braille is convenient in certain instances, and in this respect the WPA has acted in a stenographic capacity for the library.

Practically no ordinary material—with the exception of juveniles—has been edited for the use of persons who have learned, but who are not proficient, in reading by touch. It must be remembered that a blind person must need read every word, so that long descriptive passages or exacting explanations are both boresome and profitless for one who reads slowly and with difficulty. To meet this situation, short short stories of the action type have been transcribed and bound in collections of two or three. An especially wide space has been left between lines to help the new reader follow the story with as much ease as possible. This particular device has occasioned a warm appreciation from adults for whom longer stories would have been tiring and uninteresting.

It has been proved that library service for the blind can best be accomplished indirectly—through the mail. Since 1904, the United States Post Office has facilitated the use of the mails by permitting all books printed in embossed types to be carried post free to and from libraries. Talking Book records have been given the same privilege. By this means books can be supplied to the blind free of any charge.

In Indiana, circulation has been measurably improved by certain procedures designed for the blind reader's convenience in receiving or forwarding packages. It is customary, for example, to wrap each volume as a separate package, for while one book can be dropped in an ordinary mailbox, a larger package would have to be taken to a postal station. Since often the Braille transcription of a single book may run into a number of volumes—novels may vary from three to six volumes—an embossed label is pasted on the outside wrapper of each book indicating which volume is enclosed.

Other methods are employed to speed up circulation and reduce delays due to improper addressing. With each package an additional wrapper, a self-addressed label, and a length of cord are supplied for return. Since Braille material is somewhat more fragile than ordinary books and is more difficult to rebind, proper wrapping and addressing serves as a valuable protection in transit.

Because of the more or less limited resources, and because of the many technical differences involved, as well as the usual variations in reading interest, work in this field can be carried on only when a detailed knowledge of each reader's needs is on hand. Upon application for service, a person is requested to file information telling exactly what kinds of embossed printing can be used, and in the case of Braille, the particular grade which is preferred. A mimeographed form is forwarded on which the reader checks the particular types of fiction and non-fiction which he or she would like most to receive. A space is provided in which special courses of reading can be outlined.



Every opportunity successfully to adjust the selection of reading material to the individual must be made. From the foregoing, it is readily seen that the librarian for the blind has a much more personal relation to reading interests than usually exists in general library work. The psychologies of blind and sighted readers differ greatly; the former are likely to be much more complex, both mentally and emotionally, and so require a more sympathetic and individual consideration from the librarian.

A complete catalog printed in Braille of books available in the various kinds of embossed types as well as quarterly supplements are issued to all actively utilizing the Braille service. The librarian must assist in the selection of books by the record of the reader's age, remarks which have been made in letters, and a record of the titles which have been previously read. By keeping a separate book record of each individual, even a small collection of books proves surprisingly adequate.

In some instances, however, when a proper selection of books is not so easily achieved, the librarian may be aided by some agency outside the library. It is not uncommon for blind persons to request material that is beyond their reading levels. In such instances, the help of the trained visitors provided by the Indiana State Board of Industrial Aid for the Blind generally ends the difficulty. It has been found most useful to cooperate as fully as possible with all organizations and agencies whose interests are related to this field.

Service for the blind is the most spectacular and sensational kind of library activity, and invariably appeals strongly to public interest. For the librarian, publicity is of the utmost importance, for through it the cooperation of individuals and outside organizations can be enlisted to expand the limits of the annual budget. The thousands of volumes transcribed, under the auspices of the American Red Cross, have demonstrated the practical value of direct appeals to the public.

While there are received, in Indiana, all books published in Braille by the Library of Congress, the number of copies of periodicals selected from the lists of available serial material is limited. These include news magazines which are widely in demand such as the *Reader's Digest* and *Weekly News* as well as special publications for the blind. The number of magazines currently received is restricted because of shelf space necessary for keeping back files and because of the comparatively small value of this unanalyzed reading material. The *Reader's Digest* requires three large volumes each month for the transcription of its contents, so that the annual volume is sizable.

One of the projects under way is a vertical file to be made up of clipped magazine articles which will take the place of the unwieldy store of Braille magazines so seldom used. Because of the small number of books printed in raised type, carefully selected material made so accessible would have an especial and ready usefulness.

During the month of January of this year, an exhibition was held which illustrated not only the local library resources for the blind, but the developments in this field during the past thirty years. Examples of different kinds of books and embossed types were shown, Braille Writers, magazines, a hand stylus, "string" alphabet, Talking Book machine and records, Braille music and playing cards, as well as several life-size illuminated pictures illustrating the transcription and use of library material. The exhibit attracted visitors from all parts of the state.

An interesting and useful project grew out of one of the exhibits which most attracted the public. A map of the city of St. Paul, Minn., was shown which distinguished parks, bridges, streets, and buildings by such means as surfaces of glass, sand, metal staples, yarn, and strings of beads. The map was explained with labels printed in Braille. The cost of materials required to place the maps of the principal cities in Indiana in their local libraries for the use of blind persons is now being estimated, and a local organization has promised to provide the labor necessary to carry through such a project. The newest innovation in providing reading facilities for unsighted persons is the Talking Book.<sup>2</sup>

The Talking Book is not designed to replace embossed print. Records are expensive and wear quickly. Moreover, a considerable number of records are necessary for a book of average length; James Hilton's novel, *Lost Horizon*, requires eleven records in the Talking Book, but only two volumes in Braille. Twelve to fifteen disks are needed for the average book. The use of recorded literature will probably always be limited to persons who are, for some reason, unable to read by touch.

It has been estimated that three out of every four blind persons in the United States make no regular habit of reading books in embossed type. It is known that a great many of these persons are prevented from reading books published in raised print because of

<sup>2</sup> LIB. JOUR. 59:308, 315 (April 1, 1934).



LISTENING TO THE TALKING BOOK



physical handicaps which, in many cases, may be associated with their loss of sight. Some have become blind at an age which makes reading by touch impossible. Others are illiterate. Still others may have lost the sensitivity that is required in reading with the finger-tips. To all of these persons the Talking Book is a real boon, and its development an important step in supplying a contact with the world of books to a large group of intelligent people.

Machines may be purchased at cost from the American Foundation for the Blind by any blind man or woman. A great many have been given to worthy blind persons by philanthropic organizations and by individuals. The Federal government will, at present, provide a machine for any blind person who is not financially able to purchase one and who is unable to read embossed print. The distribution of Talking Book machines is handled by local agencies in cooperation with the Library of Congress depository libraries, and at intervals new lots of machines are made available to districts in which all machines previously offered have been placed. In Indiana, the need for placements has at all times exceeded the supply.

Because of the wide use which is being made of Talking Book records and because of the short time in which Talking Books have been developed as a practical medium for the library, there is, at present, an

urgent need for additional titles. The distribution of records began in October, 1934, and since that time a great deal of the money appropriated for their production has been used in building up collections of duplicate titles. Since the Talking Book is no longer an experiment, it is to be assumed that money will soon be forthcoming to produce a number of titles sufficient for ordinary library purposes.

The Talking Book has an additional value in that it offers the most pleasant example of perfect diction and pronunciation to a class of people who are handicapped in studying the English language. Books are recorded by especially trained readers, and since elocution would soon become tiresome, all classes of books from Shakespearean plays to modern novels are rendered in an ordinary conversational tone of voice.

Library service for the blind began in Indiana in 1905, when a collection of 200 oddly assorted volumes printed in several kinds of raised print was given to the State Library by a group of local blind persons. In the few intervening years it has developed into the complicated and highly specialized service that has been described—a far cry from the conditions of fifty years ago. For the future, with a more stabilized organization and a standardized technique, it can look to its establishment as a distinct branch of library science.

## The Browsing Room At Purdue University

MRS. CLARA HARVEY JOSSELYN

Librarian, Browsing Room, Purdue University, Lafayette, Ind.

"NO TIME TO READ!" Yet there is time to read, if the desire is there and if that desire may be satisfied in pleasant surroundings with good books. An answer to the problem of teaching Young America to read is found in the Browsing Rooms, fast becoming a necessary part of the cultural side of every University.

Purdue University is a technical and scientific college and, while thoroughly training its students in these branches of learning, requires that less and less time be spent upon the arts. However, Purdue believes that the reading of good books should be an essential part of every person's life, whether he is an engineer, technician, chemist, or in any other mechanical line of work. The time and energy which these studies demand at this University leaves but a small margin for the so-called cultural art of reading. Many men and women read the literature of their technical vocations, but other reading is put aside for that far distant day "when there will be more time for reading." This is usually a mirage that is never overtaken, for one seldom lives long enough to find this time which so mysteriously disappears. Unless the youth acquires the habit of reading, it seldom ap-

pears in the man. Therefore, libraries must provide such attractive surroundings and well selected literature that "recreational reading" may be applied to the time spent in this environment.

The physical aspect of the room is of vital importance and has been well met in the Browsing Room at Purdue, where a large room with southeastern exposure in the new wing of the Memorial Union is used for this purpose. The fact that the Library is located in the Union may partly account for its popularity as this gives it a recreational air, rather than the educational atmosphere generally associated with libraries. The room is carpeted in soft green, and drapes of dubonnet frame the mul-tioned windows, where the light is softened by Venetian blinds. The comfortable chairs in greens, browns, soft tapestries and leather add an atmosphere of home that is most inviting. Oak paneling or book shelves of the same soft brown extend around the room and the latter are used to form two alcoves at one end, thus giving more shelf space and increasing the architectural beauty of the room. There is a fireplace where, in the evening or on a cold afternoon, the soft whisper and crackle of



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Muriel Mercer & Kenneth R. Shaffer  
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